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SUBJECT: PM'S VISIT TO CHIANG MAI: NOT AS SMOOTH AS SILK

REF: CHIANG MAI 145 (VIOLENT CLASH)

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Sensitive but unclassified; please handle accordingly.

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Summary and Comment  
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11. (SBU) Despite concerted efforts by provincial and local officials, Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat's October 1-2 visit to Chiang Mai met with some unwelcome disruptions. Meanwhile, tensions between the anti-government People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), and the pro-government United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) that manifested themselves in the September 28 clash (reftel) remain high.

12. (SBU) Comment: Though Chiang Mai -- which is former PM Thaksin's home province -- and northern Thailand in general remain strongholds of the governing People's Power Party (PPP), the September 28 clash between the PAD and UDD, and the PAD's ability to disrupt PM Somchai's visit make it clear that anti-government forces in northern Thailand are not without the ability to express their views, even if they do so in an unorganized manner. While we would be surprised if the PPP or its successor party suffered serious setbacks in northern Thailand in a subsequent election, the PAD's ability to organize in northern Thailand appears to be improving, and may pay some dividends in future polls. End Summary and Comment.

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Somchai Gets Off on the Right Foot, but...  
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13. (SBU) According to press reports and several Consulate contacts, including a journalist who covered the PM's entire visit, PM Somchai's arrival in Chiang Mai on the evening of October 1 went off without a hitch. That trend continued into the morning of October 2, when the PM met with supporters and senior government officials from northern Thailand outside his Chiang Mai residence, and during his stop in former PM Thaksin's home district to pay homage to his wife Yaowapha's (Thaksin's sister) ancestors. Most of the rest of the trip, however, was anything but uneventful.

14. (SBU) The same journalist told us that at Chiang Mai's famous Doi Suthep temple, two women were able to get close to the heavily-guarded PM. One waved a plastic hand-clapper (commonly used by PAD supporters) at him, and the other presented him with two wrapped hand-clappers and a letter of protest. PM Somchai's lunch at a well-known restaurant was also disrupted when he was unexpectedly greeted by a group of approximately 20 men appearing to be patrons at the restaurant, some of whom our contact recognized as university lecturers and government

officials. The group waived their hand-clappers at him and asked him about the status of former PM Thaksin's diplomatic passport.

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What Happened to the PM's Protection?  
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15. (SBU) According to one of Chiang Mai's vice governors, these incidents were quite embarrassing, particularly given the significant efforts made by police and Ministry of Interior officials to ensure smooth sailing for the PM during his visit. He told us the provincial governor's office earlier instructed each of Chiang Mai's 22 district offices to mobilize as many as 200 to 500 pro-government supporters to welcome the PM at his various stops on October 2. They were asked not to wear the now-common yellow shirts (representing allegiance to the King) for fear of being confused with yellow-shirted PAD supporters.

16. (SBU) Meanwhile, under the direction of the Region Five Police Commissioner, who was a Police Academy classmate of former PM Thaksin, police officials reportedly called on leaders of the local pro-PAD and pro-UDD groups to appeal for calm, at least long enough for the PM's visit to remain peaceful. However, we noted the presence of police squads along with groups of the red-shirted pro-UDD members, in addition to supporters from outlying districts, at various locations the PM visited.

17. (SBU) Media contacts told us the PM's interaction with his entourage immediately prior to his departure left them with the impression that the disruptions to his schedule had upset Somchai. Moreover, a key local PAD leader noted that Somchai could have been more embarrassed had he and his group followed through with plans to "welcome" the PM. He told us they decided not to go through with the plan due to what he called the "premature" street demonstration by a competing PAD group on

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Sunday, September 28 (Reftel), which led to the clash between PAD and UDD supporters that evening, making any organized activities to disrupt the PM's visit unsafe for the participants.

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An Uneasy Truce  
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18. (SBU) Meanwhile, tensions between the pro-PAD and pro-UDD groups that clashed on September 28 remain high. On Monday, September 29, PAD supporters went to the police station to file charges against the UDD group, which greeted them at the station armed with swords. The police intervened, and no one was injured, but both groups filed charges against the other resulting from the September 28 confrontation. The UDD members have been charged with assault, trespassing, and causing damage to private property, while the PAD group faces charges of assault, since some UDD members claim they too were injured in the Sunday confrontation. On Tuesday September 30, the leaders of both groups were summoned to the regional police headquarters by the regional commissioner, who brokered an agreement not to disrupt PM Somchai's visit. He was, however, unable to convince them to drop the competing charges. We will continue to monitor the situation.

19. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.  
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